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# NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

MAY, 1921

## THE FARMER IN THE COMMONWEALTH

BY RALPH H. GABRIEL

AMERICAN citizens were hardly prepared to see, at the close of the recent political contest, fraternizing and even coalition between the belligerents. Yet Congress had scarcely gotten under way in December, 1920, when it became evident that the Republicans of the West were uniting with the Democrats of the South with the avowed object of enacting important agrarian legislation. To the average urban dweller in the eastern population centres the thing was inexplicable—and preposterous. “What basis has the farmer,” demanded an influential metropolitan journal, “for asking special favors not granted by him to others in the community? Is not agriculture a business like other businesses, and, as such, subject to the same kind of hazard?” A Virginia farmer answered the question:

We of the soil who have tended our flocks and tilled our land faithfully through the last twelve months have been able, aided by kindly nature, to pour into the larders of our city brethren all the food staples needed to take away the haunting fear of the “high cost of living.” . . . Of course we would like to continue to play the rôle of food philanthropists—produce food at a loss—but we cannot do it. Therefore many of us in the coming year, in spite of slogans such as “Food Wins the War” or “Feed the Nation” or “Feed Starving Europe” will merely try to feed the farmer. . . . It behooves those then who consume what we produce to eat while the eating is good—and cheap.

The challenge and the answer suggest a national situation full of unpleasant possibilities. The farmer is asserting himself

as never before. His power is both economic and political. Almost unnoticed, a new agrarian movement has been developing during the last quarter century. Now that it is coming to the surface it is called the "Menace of New Privilege" and its demands are denounced as class legislation. A force which has united the victors and the vanquished on a new firing-line is worth more than a passing consideration. What is its bearing upon our national economic life? What is it likely to do to American democracy?

Who is this American farmer now so much in the thoughts not only of his countrymen, but of the anxious people across the Atlantic? In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he brought from northern Europe a simple, almost primitive system of agriculture that had been handed down from father to son for generations. Taking suggestions from his neighbors, the Indians, he developed a self-sufficient type of farming adapted to the new country. During the nineteenth century, these scythe-swinging Americans overran the continent within the territorial limits of the United States, carrying their simple farming methods with them. They conquered and brought under cultivation a magnificent domain of almost limitless possibilities for food production. It was this accomplishment on their part that enabled American industrialism to grow, unhampered, at whatever rate it would. It must be remembered, however, that the kind of farming that characterized these years of expansion was little more than soil exploitation. Heedless and wasteful methods spread, like a pestilence, over the rich valleys of the interior. In the extension to the broad farming areas of America of this type of agriculture, born of ignorance and plenty, is to be found the *raison d'être* for the new agrarianism.

The westward sweep of the frontier produced the farming class of America. To understand the complex of cross-currents that confuse the contemporary farmers' movement and to visualize its menacing as well as beneficent possibilities, it is well to look for a moment at the heterogeneous population that spread over the valley of the Mississippi during the nineteenth century. They came in their Conestoga wagons and prairie schooners, the thrifty mingling with the thriftless, those who looked forward

to success with those who looked back upon failure, Americans with the foreign born. Some of them had been farmers; some were the derelicts of a score of other callings. The frontier was the "safety valve" of the nation whither the radical and the misfit, as well as the able and ambitious, might go to breathe the air of liberty and equality. The farmer group of America was not built up by the evolutionary method of the selection of the fit and the elimination of the unfit. The process was quite the reverse. Democracy's policy of lavish distribution of the rich bounty of nature gave the inefficient an equal chance with the efficient, the farmer with the man who knew nothing of agriculture. It is doubtful if the penalty for individual failure, either on the fields or in the city, has ever been so light as in America of the nineteenth century when the down-and-out could still go west. Of such materials the American farmer group was originally composed. Is it surprising that this group, until recently practically isolated from contemporaneous civilization, should, at times, bring forth strange things? The security enjoyed by the nineteenth century is paid for, in part, by the socialistic, Non-Partisan League of the twentieth.

But the picture is not all dark; the very disadvantages of the farmer group proved advantageous. The equality of the frontier that enticed the derelict developed a sturdy independence and an upstanding individualism that has separated the farmer of America from the peasant of Europe by an impassible gulf. The very isolation of the primitive frontier that brought intellectual stagnation developed that aggressive resourcefulness upon which success is built. Out of the composite of peoples that crossed the Appalachians came the American. Though many of the abler men left the farm for the cities, in more cases than we know the love of the soil remained with them. From these, for the most part, were recruited that army of experimenters who, in the last half of the nineteenth century, brought into being the science of agriculture.

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the conclusion of the old epoch in American farming and the beginning of the new agrarianism. The frontier disappeared bringing to an end the timeworn process of increasing agricultural products by tak-

ing up new land. Escape from the rigors of competition was cut off. Moreover, the rolling prairie country had been covered with a network of railroads and the haunts of the bison shook under the wheels of hurrying locomotives. As free land disappeared and the country filled up with people, land values rose and farms became costly. Ex-Secretary Meredith recently announced that, in the forty years from 1860 to 1900, during most of which time the frontier was an active force, farm values increased only twenty per cent. In 1920, they were five times as great as in 1900, and the end is not yet. Not only have farms become costly but the tools which have replaced the scythe and cradle have greatly increased in expense. The result of these changes is that farming has passed out of the simple, almost primitive development of the mid-nineteenth century and become a capitalistic enterprise.

This change is one of the fundamental factors in the new agrarianism. It is a change which has brought inexorable competition into the farmer group and a weeding out of the unfit and the inefficient. The purge of the riffraff that flooded the farming areas of America during the years in which they served as the safety valve of the nation has begun. The growing keenness of this competition has played no inconsiderable part in breaking down the lethargy of "old habits already and insensibly acquired without any expense of thought," and in bringing open-mindedness to the new agricultural science.

For more than a quarter of a century the land grant colleges and the State and National experiment stations developed this science against the day when there should be no more unoccupied land. They foresaw that, when it came, food production must be increased by the use of better methods. To abolish the inertia of the traditional farmer and to put the new science actually at work behind the plough was the task which lay ahead. The beginning of the solution of this problem is at the very centre of the agrarian movement of the first quarter of the twentieth century.

There is one more factor, however, that aided in changing the old epoch into the new. In the early, formative years in American history, when perhaps eighty or ninety per cent of Americans

got their living from the soil, it was difficult for farmers to feel that they belonged to a specialized class. After the turn of the nineteenth century, however, when industry began to stride forward in seven league boots and giant cities to appear, the men of agriculture began more and more clearly to see themselves as an economic group apart. They were specialists in a national division of labor of which the new capitalist and the new wage-earner were the two other most important elements. Farmers' organizations appeared, the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, the Agricultural Wheel and finally the political organization called the Populist party. The significance of these is to be found, not in their continued failures, but in their aid to the development of a group consciousness, a pride of occupation and a sense of community of interest full of significance for the future. The last of them, the Populists, met defeat in the election of 1896. Six years before, in the census of 1890, the National Government had recorded the passing of the frontier. In 1900, land values began doubling and trebling with astounding rapidity. The last decade in the nineteenth century, therefore, distinctly marks the passing of an epoch. With the beginning of the twentieth century came the new movement destined to bring profound changes to American life.

The new era for the farmers of America opened with what might almost be called a revolution. The civilization of the cities and the cultural centres began to spread, like a flood over a valley bottom, through the isolated rural districts. The innocence and simplicity of the farmer folk, a favorite theme for the writers of a few decades ago, began to give place to the sophistication of the urbanite. Within scarcely a decade, the rural free delivery, the rural telephone, improved roads and the automobile began to break down rural isolation. No longer were the farmers of America condemned to lives of few social contacts. City dailies, better farm journals and the standard books and magazines brought the events and thoughts of contemporary civilization to the firesides of the farmhouses. The types known to their city neighbors as "hoosiers" "hay-seeds" and "rubes" began to disappear. The process is yet only in its beginnings. This acculturation of the farmer group which, in spite of its handicaps,

is intellectually and morally sound must stand out as one of the important events of the early twentieth century.

The broadening of the intellectual horizon of the farmer is not, however, the only aspect of the new agrarianism. The men of the soil have taken their cue from modern commercial and industrial enterprise. Coöperation and, at times, combination have modified certain forms of competition. There are many agrarian leaders who look forward to a day not far distant when farmers' coöperative organizations of nation-wide scope will bring about fundamental modifications in our distributive system for food products and when the middle-man will be reduced to a factor of minor importance and the middle-man's profit divided between the producer and the consumer.

So important have these coöperatives become that the nation has taken cognizance of them. Their defence against the operation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law is one of the most important political problems of the farmer. The penalty for failure in this is serious. The farmer manages his enterprise on a small margin of profit in spite of the fact that it is an occupation subject to the hazards of the weather as well as those of the law of supply and demand. The smallness of this profit plus the character of rural living conditions has caused a considerable movement from the farms to the cities. This has operated against American agriculture more than the mere numbers would imply because, in general, it has been the more able men who have left the farmer group to live in the cities and to try their fortune in enterprises offering greater margins of profit. The farmers' coöperative movement has for its object the making of farming more profitable. If the National Government breaks up the farmers' coöperatives, it destroys the most important single economic factor tending to hold the abler younger men on the farms. Such action would menace the food supply of the nation, which now must be increased by better and more intelligent farming instead of by an increase in the farming area. Class legislation may be for the national interest.

But it is not in coöperatives that the most significant phase of the new agrarianism is to be found. That phase is the organization of the modern farmer group. After a long and costly

process of trial and failure which led many men to believe that the farmers could never be organized, what once seemed so difficult has been accomplished so quietly and so quickly that even the farmers themselves scarcely realize the significance of what has happened. Almost overnight, the Farm Bureau has become a factor of major national importance. It must not be believed that this is the only farmers' organization. There are active survivals of earlier organizations of which the Grange is probably the most powerful and most useful. Furthermore there are organizations of specialists within the agricultural field such as the Dairymen's League and the National Wool Growers' Association. The centre of this complex of organizations, however, is to be found in the Farm Bureau.

And what is the Farm Bureau? Its origin will explain its character. It is practically founded upon the Smith-Lever Law, signed by Mr. Wilson on May 8, 1914. This measure appropriated more than \$5,000,000 for the carrying on of agricultural extension work among the farmers of the various States, with the proviso that the States benefiting should at least duplicate the sums furnished by the National Government. It was an attempt on the part of the National Government to put the new science of agriculture actually at work on the nation's farms. The land grant colleges were to supervise the task in the States. The solution took two forms, the building up of extension departments in the colleges themselves and the development of the county agent. The latter stands at the centre of the whole organization. He is not an expert and is not supposed to be able to answer off-hand the thousands of questions that pour into his office from the citizens of the county he serves. He is a man with a general training in the science of agriculture, and it is his job to know where to get the information. He is the middle-man between the practical farmer and the scientist. For coöperation with the county agent and for the raising of money to meet part of the expenses incurred the farmers of the county are organized into a Farm Bureau.

In the main, the local bureaus have proved successful. Organization of them received a great impetus during the War when every possible effort was being made in America to increase food



production. During 1917 and 1918, they spread over almost the entire farming area of the nation. It was a natural and simple step from the county organizations to State federations of these bureaus. In November 1919, when one thousand county farm bureaus had been organized, representatives from thirty-six States, meeting at Chicago, formed the National Farm Bureau Federation. Committees were organized or projected to study coöperative marketing, transportation and rural economics in general. On these committees sit the scientists from the land grant colleges and experiment stations, editors of farm journals and practical farmers. The dues of the bureau members have put considerable financial resources at the disposal of the national organization. Out of this money is sustained a lobby at the national capital. Beginning with the national Department of Agriculture this farmers' organization reaches downward through the land grant colleges and county agents to the common farmer. This half is part of the official governmental extension work and is supported in part from the public treasury. But the other half of the organization, beginning with the County Farm Bureau, formed to assist the county agents, ascends through the State federations to the National Federation with its lobby at Washington. Although the two halves are technically separate, they practically form almost a closed circle.

The new agrarianism has, therefore, brought a new factor into American democracy. The agrarian organization includes, not only the practical farmer, but the experimental scientist. It takes in the agricultural mass from top to bottom. It has the material for able leadership, both local and national. The permanence of the organization is practically guaranteed, not only because of the Governmental and State support that it enjoys but because, through the county agent, it offers a practical solution to the problem of getting greater production out of each acre of farm land. The National and State Governments support the Bureau for the same reason that the farmers do.

But increase in production is not all. The Farm Bureau, like the Grange and the other farmers' organizations, considers the wider interests of the farmer group. This phase leads it inevitably into politics. The political methods of the Bureau show the effect

of recent political thought. The old, costly mistake of attempting to turn a farmers' organization into a political party has been avoided. The organized farmers of America accept the two dominant parties and are divided between them. Like the other economic groups of the present they work within and upon both. There is no governmental official who is not liable to feel the weight of pressure from the organized farmers. National and State federations may pass resolutions containing suggestions. The farmers' lobbies in the State and National capitals may make demands upon public servants. The sanction behind these suggestions and demands is the ballot, the one great political weapon of a democracy. It is well to remember that not only has the farmer group greater voting power than either the capitalist or labor groups, but in State after State it has a numerical superiority.

To mould this inchoate mass of ballots into a weapon that can be used with effect the National Farm Bureau Federation is establishing a service of information which will put facts of vital importance into the hands of farmers in the shortest time. This farmer group is largely American and English speaking, made up of intelligent entrepreneurs. It is not to be compared with the labor group in which a confusion of tongues and the ignorance of the foreigner regarding American affairs make effective political thinking and action extremely difficult. The leaders of the farmers, however, are not content with keeping the farmer vote informed. They have borrowed a suggestion from the old Progressive Movement and are adapting the referendum to their purposes. The report of a county agent of a New York county, dated November 10, 1920, contained the following: "Last spring when the big farmers' fight on Daylight Saving was before the Legislature the Schuyler County Farm Bureau gathered, tabulated and sent to the State Federation of Farm Bureaus the sentiment of 2,464 persons in Schuyler County who were opposed to the Daylight Saving proposition." This meant pressure of some importance upon the county's representative at the State capitol. The necessary machinery for nationwide referendums is being perfected. The tools of democracy are being used by an economic group within that democracy. A rough measure of

the future effectiveness of the plan may be found in the success of the farmer group, with its organization not yet completed, in forcing the bi-partisan coalition in Congress. Out of the quiet countryside has come a giant.

What is the significance of this for America? One thing seems clear. Before the Civil War, as Professor Turner has pointed out, national politics were to a great extent, dominated by competition and divergence of interest among the various sections within the United States. Although sectionalism still exists, it is no longer the controlling political factor. It is now competition and divergence of interest among at least three economic groups that form the undercurrents driving the straws on the political surface. Unpleasant as this fact may be, it can no longer be ignored. In estimating the economic and political resources of the three groups it is well to remember that, upon our American fields and meadows we have reared a great industrial structure, a veritable Tower of Babel lifting its builders high above an immediate struggle with the natural environment in the effort to maintain life. Yet these builders, though raised above the pastures and the grain fields, cannot shake off an elemental dependence upon them. The food quest is as vital today as it was to the primitive savage who hunted the beasts in the forest. The recent war has made this dependence very vivid. The speed with which Babel can be built now depends upon whether the farmer increases his yields of wheat and corn. He controls the food quest. His dawning realization of this fact may be called, for want of a better name, the new agrarianism.

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